Etymology of "Pope"

a journey through the evolution of a prestigious form of address, and of a proper name

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Abstract

This essay provides an examination of the etymology of the term “pope” in comparison to historical events that occurred during the steps within the evolutionary process, as well as the paternal roles of the father, bringing clarity as to the meaning of “pope.” Periods in time, such as Ancient and Byzantine Greece, and the Middle Ages, as well as the periods in which languages were formed and brought into use, such as Vulgar Latin and Old English, are scrutinized in order to draw closer estimates as to when each step in the evolutionary process of the term “pope” was made. Through these examinations, certain ideas are discounted as myths, such as the myth of the term “pope” being a title, and the myths as to when the term “pope” was first used as a form of address for the Bishop of Rome. Finally, an examination is presented of details regarding the earliest know records of the Pope surname in England, and a theory is proposed from the findings that the Pope surname may have arrived in England, during the late 12th century, from France or Belgium, and that the surname may actually have its origins in one of those countries.

Keywords: pope, surname, etymology, onomastics, genealogy, history

Etymology of “Pope”

Throughout the world, the term “pope” (/poʊp/) holds significant historical and religious connotations primarily associated with the Bishop of Rome. With this being stated, and before delving into the etymological evolution of the term “pope,” it is crucial to understand its fundamental nature. Contrary to popular belief, the term “pope” has never functioned as an official or unofficial religious title within the Christian Church, nor have any of the terms from which it evolved. Instead, as they are used within religious context, these terms have always been forms of address denoting respect and reverence for religious leaders in their roles as spiritual father figures.

As “pope” evolved from its ancient form, one thing remained constant – the underlying meaning of “father” inherent in the term and its etymological ancestors. Whether these terms were used to denote the paternal figure within family structure or to address religious leaders, the essence of paternal authority was always present.

This understanding sheds light on why the term “pope,” when preceding the name of the Bishop of Rome, is capitalized – much like other terms of address such as uncle, aunt, mister, or missus. The capitalization serves as a mark of distinction and respect, highlighting the unique position held by the pope within the Catholic Church. It emphasizes his role as not just a spiritual leader but also a symbolic father figure for millions of believers worldwide. This linguistic tradition reflects centuries-old customs and traditions that have shaped our perceptions of respect, and of religious authority.

The journey to explore the origins of the term “pope” takes us back to its roots in ancient Greek as “páppas” (πάππας), meaning “papa” or “daddy.” This simple yet powerful word encapsulates the essence of what a pope represents – a spiritual father guiding his flock with wisdom and compassion. As this term transitioned through various languages and cultures, it eventually evolved into the English “pope,” meaning “father.”

The application of the term “pope,” as a form of address, is a subject of much confusion among some historians and lexicologists. Some argue that the term was in use as early as the 3rd century, while others claim that it came into use around the end of the 4th century. In this essay, we will journey through the etymological evolution of the term

"pope" in a search for the more plausible period of time in which this term was first put into use.

To begin, let us consider the assertion made by Joyce (1913), et. al., that the term "pope" was in use as early as the 3rd century. While there certainly was an early form of the word in Greek during this time, it is important to note that the etymological evolution of the term "pope" was only transitioning into early Byzantine Greek by the 3rd century. The fact that the term was just experiencing its 3rd century evolutionary transformation demonstrates that it could not have been used as a form of address as early as the 3rd century.

On the other hand, *Religion Facts* (2004), Bettencourt (2010), et. al., assert that the term "pope" was in use by the end of the 4th century. However, this could not have been the case since the etymological evolution of the term "pope" had not yet transitioned through Old English, a language which evolved around 476 AD. The fact that the term had not yet experienced its late-5th to early-8th century evolutionary transformation demonstrates that the term "pope" could not have been used as a form of address by the end of the 4th century.

It appears that much of the confusion regarding the period of time in which the term "pope" came about and was used as a form of address extends from texts in which inaccurate translations of Greek are posed. The edited republication of Pamphilus' *Sacred Writings of Eusebius Pamphilus* (2012), for example, demonstrates this issue through its translation of a letter from Dionysius of Alexandria to Philemon. The original Greek version of the letter includes the phrase: "τοῦ μακαρίου πάπα ἠμῶν Ἡρακλᾶ," which the editor of Pamphilus' writings translated to "our blessed father/pope, Heraclas." The crux of the matter lies in the interpretation of the Greek word πάπα, which means "papa," rather than "pope" – a term which did not yet exist. This mistranslation, like others, appears to have led many to confusion regarding the timeline for when the term "pope" was first used.

Each step in the evolution of the term "pope" provided a new term which may have been roots for variant terms such as "popo" and "poppo." By tracing the term "pope" from its roots in ancient Greece and following its journey through different cultures and

languages, we will be able to gain a deeper appreciation for the significance of this term as a form of address which later evolved into a surname. The legacy of both continues to shape our understanding of authority and spirituality today.

Through onomastics, the study of the origin and history of names, the stages of evolution for the term “pope” have been meticulously examined and documented. Wiktionary, a reputable online source for etymology, presents a detailed account of these stages that will serve as the foundation for our exploration in this essay (Etymology of pope).

páppas (πάππας)

In ancient Greece, the term “páppas” (πάππας)[1] was used to refer to a father figure, a patriarch within the family structure. This word, which survives from ancient times, is the etymological root for the English term “pope,” which carries with it connotations of paternal authority and leadership. The translation of this ancient root word into English as “papa” or “daddy” highlights the intimate and affectionate relationship between a father and his child.

The role of a father in shaping the character of his child is paramount. It is by the foot of the father that character is passed down, as his actions and deeds serve as examples for his offspring to follow. Just as footprints leave a trail behind, so too do a father’s actions leave an indelible mark on the character of his child.

At the knee of the father, paternity is acknowledged, and wisdom is imparted. When a father takes his child upon his knee and imparts knowledge or guidance, he fulfills one of many roles in shaping the child’s understanding of the world. The act of kneeling to pray further amplifies these examples, as it demonstrates humility and reverence before higher powers.

[1] The lower case form of the Greek “sigma” (ς) denotes word-final position, or end of a word, and may not appear in Greek texts where words are used within sentences. The absence of this character from the end of a word does not change the meaning of the word.

The arms of a father provide security and comfort to his children. Through loving embraces, a father offers solace in times of need and despair, creating a safe haven within his embrace. This sense of security instilled by a father’s arms lays the foundation for confidence and resilience in his offspring.

The hands of a father work tirelessly to meet the needs of his children, and to secure their futures. Through labor and dedication, a father provides sustenance for his family, builds a home where memories are made, and accumulates legacies for future generations. The hard work and sacrifice embodied in these hands shape not only the present but also pave the way for future success.

Ultimately, it is by the heart of a father that the family structure is sustained. The depth of love that a father holds for his children drives him to become a pillar within the family, guiding with compassion and strength. This love acts as a guiding force that influences every aspect of a father’s interactions with his children – from how he uses his hands to how he opens his arms or bend at his knees.

Fathers play an indispensable role in shaping the lives of their children through their actions at every level – from providing comfort with open arms to imparting wisdom at bended knees. The roots of paternal influence run deep within our language itself; from ancient Greek origins to modern English translations, the essence remains unchanged – that fathers hold immeasurable power in shaping not only individual characters but also entire family structures through love and guidance passed down through generations.

The father, or páppas (πάππας), is not just a provider or protector but also a teacher, a guide, and a role model for his children. His deeds and actions shape the futures of his offspring, influencing their values, beliefs, and destinies.

It is fascinating to note how the term “pope” in English has its roots in the ancient Greek word for father, “páppas.” The connection between the two words highlights the significance of paternal figures in shaping society and culture. Just as a father plays a crucial role within the family unit, so too does the pope hold a pivotal position within the Catholic Church as the spiritual father of millions of followers around the world.

The form of address “pope” is synonymous with “father,” symbolizing not only his authority but also his responsibility towards his flock. Like a caring parent, he is tasked with guiding and nurturing his followers in matters of faith and morality. Through his teachings and actions, he sets an example for others to follow, much like how a father’s deeds influence his children.

One cannot overlook the parallel between the role of fathers within families and that of the pope within the Church. Both are seen as sources of guidance, wisdom, and authority, responsible for leading their respective communities towards greater understanding and unity. It is due to these parallels that the English term “pope” sprouted from the ancient Greek “páppas” (πάππας).

páppas (πάππας) → pápas (πάπας)

In the ancient Greek language, the word páppas (πάππας) meant “papa” or “daddy.” It was a term used to refer to a father figure within the family unit. However, as time passed and societal structures evolved, this term underwent a significant transformation, ultimately becoming associated with a different kind of paternal role – that of priests. The transition from being a familial term to a form of address denoting spiritual authority is both fascinating and profound, shedding light on the cultural shifts and religious developments that shaped ancient Greek society and, eventually, the world.

The journey of the word páppas (πάππας) from its original meaning to its later use as a form of address for priests and bishops can be seen as a reflection of the evolving role of religious figures within Greek society. In ancient times, fathers were revered as heads of their households, responsible for providing guidance, protection, and support to their families. The term páppas (πάππας) encapsulated this sense of familial authority and affection, embodying the bond between father and child. As the concept of spiritual fatherhood emerged as an important aspect of religious life, priests took on the role of guiding their congregations, offering spiritual counsel, and providing moral leadership. In this context, the word páppas (πάππας) was repurposed as pápas (πάπας) to signify not just a biological father but also a spiritual one – a figure who nurtured the souls of his flock with wisdom and compassion.

The transformation of páppas (πάππας) into pápas (πάπας) highlights the interconnectedness of language, culture, and belief systems. It demonstrates that words are not static entities; they evolve over time in response to changing social dynamics and ideological shifts. The transition from the literal “papa” to the concept of “spiritual father” speaks to the deep-rooted human need for guidance and mentorship, whether in familial or religious contexts.

pápas (πάπας) → papâs (παπᾶς)

By the 3rd century, as Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire, the term pápas (πάπας) underwent a linguistic transformation into papâs (παπᾶς), becoming a form of address specifically denoting the Bishop of Alexandria – a prominent figure in the Eastern Christian world who played a crucial role in theological debates and ecclesiastical politics during this period. This shift not only reflected changes in language but also highlighted the cultural influences and theological developments that were shaping early Christian doctrine.

The evolution of pápas (πάπας) into papâs (παπᾶς) symbolized more than just a linguistic change; it represented a broader shift in how religious authority was understood and exercised within early Christianity. Eventually, the priests to whom the people turned as pápas (πάπας) – “spiritual fathers” – no longer bore that form of address. The evolved form of address “papâs” (παπᾶς) came to be reserved for the Bishop of Alexandria, a papal figure who wielded significant influence not only within his own diocese but also on a larger scale within Christian communities across the Eastern Mediterranean.

papâs (παπᾶς) → papa (*V. Lat.*)

The term “papâs” (παπᾶς) has deep roots in the Greek Orthodox tradition where it once denoted a spiritual leader with significant influence over the Christian community in Alexandria. As Christianity spread throughout the Mediterranean world, this form of address gained prominence and respect among believers. However, as Latin became more prevalent throughout Western Europe, especially during the rise of the Roman Catholic Church, linguistic changes were inevitable.

The gradual shift from Byzantine Greek to Vulgar Latin saw the Greek term “papâs” (παπᾶς) being adapted into the Vulgar Latin term “papa.” By the 8th century, the Vulgar Latin term “papa” was a form of address used exclusively for the Bishop of Rome. This linguistic transition not only reflected a change in language but also signified a broader shift in religious authority and power dynamics within Christianity.

To better understand this linguistic evolution, let us delve into a narrative that illustrates how cultural exchanges and historical developments shaped the transformation of “papâs” (παπᾶς) into “papa.” Imagine a bustling marketplace in medieval Rome where merchants from different regions converge to trade goods and ideas. Among them is a Byzantine scholar who introduces his Greek form for addressing a bishop – “papâs” (παπᾶς) – to his Latin-speaking counterparts.

Initially met with curiosity and intrigue, this foreign word gradually finds its way into everyday conversations among clergy and scholars in Rome. As discussions about ecclesiastical hierarchy unfold, some begin to see parallels between the role of the Bishop of Alexandria and that of the Bishop of Rome. The term “papâs” (παπᾶς), with its connotations of spiritual leadership and authority, begins to resonate with those seeking to strengthen papal supremacy.

Over time, as Latin becomes more standardized and widely used in religious texts and rituals, the term “papa” gains traction as a form of address reserved exclusively for the Bishop of Rome – solidifying his position as head of the Catholic Church and Holy Father of Christians throughout the world. The once obscure Byzantine Greek term now takes on new significance in shaping Western Christianity’s understanding of papal authority.

papa (*V. Lat.*) → pāpa (*Old Eng.*)

The Middle Ages, also known as the Dark Ages, spanning from around 476 AD to 1450, was marked by significant cultural, political, and linguistic changes. Scholar Albert Baugh (1951, 60–83, 110–130), acknowledging that the establishment of dates for when languages were spoken is an arbitrary process, attempted to pinpoint the timeline of linguistic evolution of Old English, also known as Anglo-Saxon, from 450 AD to 1150, shedding light on the language’s development during the Middle Ages.

It was during the early Middle Ages when the Vulgar Latin term “papa” became present in Old English as “pāpa.” Given the time periods for the Middle Ages and Old English, this linguistic evolution would have occurred between 476 AD and 800 AD. Considering that the Vulgar Latin “papa” came into exclusive use as a form of address for the Bishop of Rome by the 8th century, the date range for the evolution to Old English pāpa can be better represented as being between 700 AD and 800 AD.

pāpa (*Old Eng.*) → popa → pope

While Wiktionary does not provide an exact timeline for the linguistic transformation of “papa” to “popa,” then of “popa” to “pope,” historical evidence suggests that it occurred in the early-11th century. This period coincides with the reign of Pope Gregory VII, who played a pivotal role in defining the authority and lineage of the papacy.

The term “papa” originally denoted a spiritual father or leader within early Christian communities. Over time, this term evolved into “popa,” signifying a shift in pronunciation and perhaps connotation as well. The transition from “popa” to “pope” further solidified the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church, with Pope Gregory VII asserting his authority by restricting the use of this prestigious form of address to only those deemed successors of St. Peter.

During Pope Gregory VII’s reign, from 1073 to 1085, he sought to assert papal supremacy over secular rulers and to reform various aspects of church governance. By insisting on the exclusive use of the form of address “pope” for his successors, Gregory VII reinforced the idea of apostolic succession and emphasized the continuity of leadership within the church. This decree not only solidified the position of the pope as a central father-figure in Christian theology but also contributed to shaping the linguistic landscape surrounding papal authority.

The evolution from the ancient Greek páppas (πάππας) to “pope” encapsulates a gradual but significant transformation in both language and religious symbolism. It highlights how words carry layers of meaning that reflect broader historical contexts and power dynamics. The transition from a simple term for fatherly figures in ancient Greek

society to an exclusive form of address reserved for certain spiritual leaders underscores how language can shape perceptions and hierarchies within society.

Tracing the evolution of terms related to papal authority offers us valuable insights into both linguistic development and historical change. From humble beginnings as “páppas” (πάππας) to its grandeur as “pope,” this journey mirrors shifts in religious doctrine, political influence, and cultural identity. By exploring this linguistic evolution, we gain a deeper appreciation for how words can carry weighty significance across centuries. As we reflect on the etymology of the term “pope,” we are reminded that language is not merely a tool for communication but also a reflection of our collective history and beliefs.

“pope” (as a form of address) → “Pope” (as a surname)

Historical records demonstrate that the surname “Pope” evolved from the term “pope” by the 12th century. One piece of evidence supporting this claim can be found in a 13th century document dated April 16, 1228, where Alice, widow of William le Pope, quit-claimed her deceased husband’s lands in Warblington for the price of ten shillings.[2]

The mention of William le Pope in Alice’s quit-claim document provides crucial information about the timeline of the Pope surname’s development. The year of Alice’s quit-claim, 1228, at which time she was a widow, makes it apparent that William le Pope was most likely born during the mid-to-latter part of the 12th century.

Other early 13th century records of the Pope surname in England, some of whom were likely born in the 12th century, are: 1230, Agnes le Pope, in *Barnwell Memorandum Book*, Cambridgeshire; 1247, Hugo le Pope, in Assize Rolls, Bedfordshire; 1267, Robert le Pope, in Patent Rolls of Hertsfordshire; 1296, Henry Pope, in Subsidy Rolls of Sussex (Hanks, Coates and McClure 2016, 2141).

Of particular interest is the presence of the definite article “le” before the surname “Pope” for Alice, William, Agnes, Hugo, and Robert. This distinctive feature hints at a possible French or Belgian origin for these individuals. Furthermore, since the article “le”

[2] CP 25/1/203/5, no. 39. http://www.medievalgenealogy.org.uk/fines/abstracts/CP_25_1_203_5.shtml [w/ link to digital image of record] (Accessed: 06 June 2024).

translates to “the” in the English language, the surname “the Pope” suggests a possible defiance to the papacy since the form of address “Pope” was then reserved exclusively for the Bishop of Rome.

The earliest known record of the Pope surname in England is of William le Pope and his wife, Alice, who resided in Warblington. This small village, situated just north of Hayling Island and across the English Channel from Caen, France, bolsters the hint at a possible French origin for this couple. The lack of earlier records of the Pope surname in England raises the intriguing possibility that William le Pope and Alice may have even been among the very first Popes to immigrate to England.

If this theory holds true, it would challenge the traditional understanding of the origin of the surname “Pope”. While it is widely accepted that the term “pope” itself is English in nature, being derived from Old English and Middle English roots, and that the surname “Pope” was derived from the term “pope,” this new perspective opens up the possibility that the surname may actually have either French or Belgian origins.

The probable migration of William le Pope and his wife to England could have marked a pivotal moment in shaping the identity and heritage associated with the Pope surname. Additional research will be required to determine if their journey can be traced back to France or Belgium. If so, genealogists can begin to unravel a more complex narrative surrounding this seemingly straightforward surname.

Conclusion

The etymology of the term “pope” has been thoroughly examined in conjunction with the historical events that transpired during the various stages of its evolutionary development. By delving into the paternal roles assumed by the father figure, a clearer understanding of the significance behind the term “pope,” as it is used within the Catholic Church, has been highlighted.

Significant periods in history, including Ancient and Byzantine Greece, as well as the Middle Ages, were meticulously analyzed to more closely pinpoint the origins of this term. Likewise, the emergence and evolution of languages such as Vulgar Latin and Old English

were closely scrutinized to better determine when each stage in the evolution of “pope” occurred.

Certain misconceptions surrounding the term “pope” have been addressed and dispelled, including the fallacy that the term “pope” is a title bestowed upon religious leaders. Additionally, myths regarding when “pope” was first utilized as a form of address for the Bishop of Rome have been addressed and debunked through rigorous examination.

Through the comprehensive investigations presented in this essay, a more accurate timeline of the evolution of the term “pope” has been established, shedding light on its true origins, meaning, and significance in history.

Additionally, what may be the earliest known record of the Pope surname in England has been identified, as well as the individuals named within that record. Through astute observation of details associated with the their names, as well as the geographic location in which these individuals resided at the time, a plausible theory has been proposed as to the most probable origin of the Pope surname.

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